

AN
ADDRESS
TO THE ¹⁶
PLAIN SENSE
OF THE
PEOPLE,
ON THE
PRESENT HIGH PRICE
OF
BREAD.

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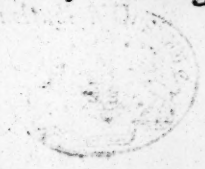
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AN
ADDRESS,

&c.

THERE is no man who has the welfare of his country at heart, and who has reflected upon the distresses which the high price of provisions must occasion among a numerous class of the people, who does not feel most sincerely anxious to alleviate their misfortunes during the present year, and to find, if possible, the means of averting so great a calamity for the future. The first step towards attaining so desirable an object, is to trace, as accurately as we can, the causes from whence this calamity springs. If error be persisted in, and acted upon, instead of adding to our supplies, it will, in its consequences, destroy those already in our possession; it will aggravate the evil
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it affects to cure, and will convert scarcity into real famine.

That there was a deficiency in the wheat crop of last year (however confidently denied at the time) is now no longer matter of opinion. The importation of above 1,200,000 quarters of wheat and flour (probably full one sixth of the consumption), the sparing use of the article during the year, and the small stock on hand at the period of an early harvest, render that fact indisputable.

Some increase in the average price of this article, beyond that of former times; is to be accounted for by the usual quantity produced not being equal to the general demand; and the present high price is chiefly to be traced to the deficiency in the present crop, and to the old crop being exhausted before the present harvest could be brought into use; though other circumstances have contributed still further to advance the price.

The importation and exportation accounts of the Custom-house clearly demonstrate that the annual average produce of wheat, in this country, is not sufficient for the annual demand: besides which, to the ordinary deficiency of our produce, it appears that, in this year, as well as the last, is to be added the misfortune of a produce below the average.

If we fairly consider the subject, can we wonder that this should be the nature of the information

which has been obtained? The weather, in the months of June and July, was so remarkably fine, that every body cried out that the harvest must be abundant. People forgot that the seed-time, the most important season for the farmer, had been particularly unfavourable; and that it had produced in many places an evil which no subsequent fine weather could remedy, that of preventing him from sowing the same quantity of land which he would have done in a more favourable season. It must also be observed, that though the fine weather enabled some of the farmers in the southern parts of the country to get in their harvest much earlier than usual, in the northern parts the wheat was too backward to permit the farmer to take advantage of the same season; and even in many districts where the harvest was the earliest, it has been found that the very warm weather setting in so soon in the year, had the effect of ripening the corn before it had reached its full growth; that much of it does not yield well in threshing; and that the farmer, with his early and well-housed harvest, has only reaped a diminished crop.

At the present moment, however, other circumstances concur to contribute to the high price of wheat, and may naturally have raised it much higher, for a time, than the state of the crop alone would justify. The old stock of corn was
nearly

nearly exhausted at the period of the harvest of the present year. The seed-time this year has been as favourable as that of the last was unpropitious, a circumstance in itself very satisfactory, but which has necessarily produced a more than usual demand for feed ; the high price at the same time has naturally induced the farmer to sow a greater quantity of wheat, and the failure of the turnip crops in some parts, has left more land than usual in a state to receive it, while the circumstance of the season, and the peculiar fineness of the weather, have given so much employment out of doors, as to interfere, in some degree, with threshing the greatest possible quantity of corn. These circumstances are sufficient to account for excessive dearness at the present moment, even on the supposition of the harvest having been abundant ; and they afford us reasonable ground to expect that the present very high price will not be of long duration, provided that we take such measures as are within our reach towards making good the existing deficiency.

The same considerations are sufficient to account for the high price of provisions in general, without imputing it to the tricks and practices of monopolists. To say that such men do not exist would be nearly as absurd as to join the cry we have lately heard—"that they dwell in every street, and infest every market." In the trade of corn, the dealers

are too numerous to allow the schemes of such men to be frequently successful; nine times out of ten they must be losers by the competition of the fair trader.

But if monopoly has not materially contributed to aggravate the evil we endure, have the speculations of the farmer, the corn-dealer, or the miller, tended to this point? or is the capital of any one of these descriptions of persons, as it has been represented, unnecessarily, and therefore injuriously, employed in the corn-trade?

If the farmer were obliged to sell all the corn he brought to market to the consumer, and if the consumer could only purchase of the farmer, what would be the consequence? In an overstocked market the farmer must be ruined, and in an ill-supplied market the consumer must starve. Hence arises the necessity of the employment of the capital of the *middle man*, (called by the ignorant a monopolist,) who, by affording the farmer a certain sale, enables him to sell cheaper; and who, because he purchases more than he consumes, has the means of furnishing the market with whatever the demand may require. No large city could be adequately supplied without the intervention of these middle men, who have lately been represented as interfering without necessity, and have been treated by a misguided mob as objects of public odium and detestation.

Farmers

Farmers and other dealers in corn have been said to have kept that article in store lately more than in ordinary times, and so to have held up the price. But are we sure this is an evil? Is not, in the time of scarcity, the interest of the dealer in corn and that of the public, in a great degree the same? If he brought his corn to market, as in a plentiful year, the whole corn of the country would be consumed in the first few months: a scanty crop should be spread sparingly over every part of the year, and it is the high price that saves any of it to the end. As to the idea of a combination of farmers to hoard their corn, it is chimerical; they do not communicate enough with each other to combine; and if they did communicate, their numbers and their different circumstances would preclude the possibility of such a practice: they were never supposed to have hoarded more upon speculation than in the last twelve months, and yet the old stock of corn was never so nearly exhausted on the appearance of the new crop as in the present season.

The miller also has been supposed, in these times of scarcity, to have made unjust profits: like that of all other trades, his profit is the largest when the capital he employs is greatest, or, in other words, when the article in which he deals is dearest. In times of abundance there is a competition of sellers, all looking for a living

living profit; in times of scarcity there is a competition of hoarders, all looking for a rising price. But this has its limits. If a dealer hoards too long, he is a loser, and has only enabled his competitors to get the high price. This is the nature of all trades of speculation, and such is necessarily, in a great degree, the trade of the miller.

It is impossible, however, to consider the state of this country without perceiving other causes which operate to raise the price of every article, and particularly of those of constant demand. The wealth of the nation itself, astonishingly increased of late by the extension of our commerce, and the number of rich competitors in the market, must necessarily produce this effect. But is this an argument against a nation enriching itself by the industry of its inhabitants?

Does the wealth of the nation then do us no harm in raising the price of wheat? Not if the price of every other thing is suffered to bear its due and relative proportion. If, for instance, the wages of labour do not, *in general*, enable the labourer to maintain himself as he did formerly, his wages ought to be raised; it is a decided proof that the rise of wages has not kept pace with the average increase of the price of those articles which are necessary to his support, or, in other words, that his wages have not been raised as the value of money has been depreciated: but raise his wages to that level,

level, the nominal value of money is of no consequence to him ; his condition, except in years of extraordinary scarcity, produced by the seasons, remains the same ; he considers the possession of a shilling now, as he did that of sixpence thirty or forty years ago, because he earns it with the same ease, and because it procures him the same necessaries of life.

It is not meant that the price of wages should be raised according to the present high price of wheat — certainly not ; a temporary difficulty may be met by a temporary remedy ; but the rate of wages should be fixed according to the ordinary price of wheat, or of that grain which is the common sustenance of the labourer in the district. Whatever is the state of the crop, the labourer surely is entitled to his proportion of the supply ; if his wages be thus settled, that proportion will be less, as it ought to be, in a season of extraordinary scarcity and high price, than in one of abundance : the difference on such an emergency should be made up to him, by the gratuity of his employer, in any other article of food, by the bounty and voluntary contribution of individuals, of which we have seen such general proofs, and by the judicious application of parochial relief, adapted to such peculiar circumstances.

In all times those who have opposed a war, have imputed to it every calamity which has taken place during

during its continuance; of course it is said to be the great and leading cause of the distress arising from the present high price of provisions. But how it produces this effect, those who make the assertion never condescend to tell us. They would readily admit, that as the war continues its influence should increase. How, then, did it happen, that in the course of the years 1795 and 1796, when the war could not have had any great effect, the price of wheat was excessively high; and in the years 1797 and 1798, when that influence, we should suppose, would have considerably increased, it was, perhaps, even lower than those who wish to encourage its growth could desire? But let those who maintain this opinion look at the price of wheat in every year from the beginning of the century to the present time. If that opinion were correct, a number of years of war must be clearly and evidently marked by a rise in the price, much more considerable than that which took place in the same number of years of peace. The influence of war would not only be general, but it would particularly affect the price in the years of its continuance. What is the fact? In the rise which took place in the course of the century, the operation of war is scarcely, if at all, perceptible: and it was about the year 1767, and during a period of profound peace, when we lost our exportation trade, and
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when that necessity of importation first began, which has since risen to so alarming a height.

If it be said that in time of war a certain number of persons consume more as soldiers and sailors, than they would in other employments in time of peace, the amount of that trifling excess, as far as it goes, is fairly to be placed to the account; but it must be recollected also, that many of these persons are fed by supplies bought abroad, and which, if the war did not exist, would not be obtained. Our navy upon distant stations is chiefly supplied by purchases made upon the spot; and the whole quantity of wheat purchased in England by the Commissioners of Victualling, from the beginning of this year to the present period, does not amount to one fourteenth part of the quantity which has been imported within the same time. If it be meant that the war, in transferring to this country so great a part of the commerce of the world, has transferred with it great additional wealth, and that this has produced high price—The weight of this consideration is already admitted.

If the taxes imposed during the present war be represented to have produced the high price of provisions, it seems natural to suppose that taxes would have had the same effect in former wars; and yet it appears, by the price of wheat during the century, which has been mentioned,

tioned, and as far as the price of that article governs that of others, that they had not that effect.

The high price of wheat and of bread is not then the effect of monopoly and combination—is not the effect of the speculations of the farmer, the corn-dealer, or the miller—is not the consequence of the war. All these things have their weight in the scale, but that weight is not great or preponderating. It is the effect of an ordinary consumption exceeding our ordinary produce, and of a produce, in the last and in the present years, below the average; the price is still further augmented by the increased wealth of the nation, and the consequent depreciation in the value of money. The remedies for this evil of scarcity and high price are not to inflame the mob against monopolists—to restrain the freedom of the trade in corn, or to fetter and check the commerce of the nation. The obvious remedies are, the more limited use of wheat; and a further encouragement to the importation of it; and the extension of our corn land, by the removal of every impediment which obstructs general enclosure, and by taking such measures as would tend to give greater encouragement to cultivation. To meet the difficulty of the present year, other measures may be necessary, and Parliament will adopt such

such as are suited to the degree of scarcity which prevails. The use of wheat should be prohibited in every mode which does not tend to the food of man; and a positive law may be necessary to limit the consumption, and perhaps no wheat should be permitted to be ground into flour out of which any part should be taken except the bran, or without the mixture of a certain proportion of other grain; and means should be adopted to appropriate a larger proportion of barley and oats to the food of man. As to a *maximum*, fortunately it is as impracticable as it would be unjust and impolitic; it would do more to discourage agriculture, and to starve the people, than any measure which has been suggested. This plan was tried in France; it failed: and the measure was revoked to save the people from absolute famine.

There seems also to be an objection to a measure which has been taken, with the very best intentions, by gentlemen in different parts of the country—that of entering into agreements to sell wheat at a cheap rate, or of dealing it out at a reduced price to their labourers: this practice, as far as it goes, is aggravating the evil it is meant to cure; it is risking a famine to avoid a scarcity. If the adoption of such a plan be partial and confined to a particular parish, every neighbouring parish is discontented; if it

becomes general, it encourages an undue consumption. But far be it from any person to check the bounty of one individual at the present moment; never was there a time when the poor man called more loudly for assistance: all we would do, should be to direct it into the most useful channel. When the high price of wheaten bread, the ordinary food of a great part of the people, places it, in a great degree, out of their reach, the greatest kindness to them as well as the most valuable charity, is to encourage the use of every substitute, and to deal out to them, with a liberal hand, any other article applicable to the sustenance of man.

In all nations the high price of provisions has been eagerly seized upon by the disaffected, as the readiest instrument for promoting their views. They are aware that, while this subject of complaint endures, many, who have no other feeling in common with them, will hastily embrace some of their opinions, and enlist, for a time at least, under their banners. In this country the promoters of sedition, who had hidden themselves in holes and corners, in silent malignity, have not suffered this opportunity entirely to escape; they have in some places again put forth their heads, have joined the clamours of the mob, and have been instrumental in leading them to the houses, the mills, and the barns, of those whom they
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chose to brand with the character of monopolists. Such men know by experience, that, in this country, they never have so little chance of success as when they depend upon the intrinsic merits of their own cause; they know how necessary it is for their purpose to press into their service every discontent, and to mingle every complaint, from whatever source it may arise, with their pretended grievances; but, whatever may be the object of such persons, a moment's reflection must convince every honest man, that, in times of dearth and scarcity, nothing is so likely to lessen those evils, and to promote the object of his wishes, as the strictest obedience to the laws; and that tumult and commotion necessarily obstruct those channels through which the supply must come, from which he is to be fed.

Upon the whole, there is no doubt that there is a deficiency of wheat at the present moment; there is as little doubt that the means of supplying it, or of alleviating its effects, are completely within our reach. Large supplies, it is known, may be obtained from foreign parts, and Parliament has taken the measure of offering an encouraging bounty for the purpose of bringing them to this country; the most economical plan in the use of wheat among the more opulent classes will undoubtedly, under the recommendation of our gracious and beloved King,
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be readily adopted ; measures are taking to render the fisheries of our coasts serviceable to the food of the people ; excellent herrings will very shortly be sold in all the principal towns throughout the kingdom at a cheaper rate than any other article of provisions ; and the liberal encouragement held out by the East India Company to the importers of rice, will furnish a large supply before the next harvest. All these considerations tend to relieve our apprehensions : and, upon the whole, there appears to be not only no danger of famine ; but from the disposition to meet the difficulty, which seems to manifest itself, there is reason to hope, that when the causes of high price, which have been stated to apply peculiarly to the present moment, cease to operate, the poorer classes of society may be, in a great measure, relieved from the pressure of that calamity which they now endure.

December 10th, 1800.

THE END.



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